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AUTHOR	McGaw, Barry; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This report provides a detailed analysis of the personal communications between parents and teachers and teachers and children in the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Program in Australia. The communications include letters, tapes, Teacher Information Sheets, and personal meetings and are analyzed by (1) type of contact and topic, (2) frequency of interaction, (3) properties of interactions, and (4) types of comments. (JMB)

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INTERACTIONS IN THE PRE-SCHOOL CORRESPONDENCE PROGRAM

No. 3 in a series on the evaluation of
the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Program

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of the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Program

INTERACTIONS IN THE PRE-SCHOOL CORRESPONDENCE PROGRAM

Barry McGaw
Gerald Ashby
Rosemary Perry

PS 00868

Research Branch
Department of Education, Queensland

December 1975

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CONTENTS

List of Tables

INTRODUCTION 1

ANALYSIS OF INTERACTIONS 2

Classification of Contacts 2
Classification of Topics 2

SAMPLE 3

FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION 4

Frequency of Contact 4
Intensity of Contact 6
Time Lag between Contacts 8

PROPERTIES OF INTERACTIONS 10

Stimuli for Comments 10
Types of Comments 11
Substance of Comments 14

ANALYSES OF COMMENTS 16

Routine Comments 16
Requests 18
Teachers' Responsiveness to Parents' Concerns 24
Provision of Information 26
Judgements of Value 29
Extensions to Program 33

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS 36

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1:	Substance of Topic	2
Table 2:	Type of Topic	3
Table 3:	Number of Children in Sample Taught by Each Teacher	4
Table 4:	Overall and Average Frequency of Communications	4
Table 5:	Numbers of Contacts without Substantive Comment	5
Table 6:	Average Number of Substantive Contacts per Family by Teachers	6
Table 7:	Average Number of Topics per Contact	7
Table 8:	Distribution of Topics within Contacts	7
Table 9:	Distribution of Topics within Contacts by Form of Contact	8
Table 10:	Time Lag between Successive Contacts with Opposite Parties	9
Table 11:	Frequency of Multiple Contacts before Reply	10
Table 12:	Stimulus for Comment	10
Table 13:	Distribution of Types of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience	12
Table 14:	Overall Distribution of Comments by Type and Substance	15
Table 15:	Distribution of Substance of Routine Comments from Each Source to Each Audience	17
Table 16:	Distribution of Substance of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience Requesting and Seeking Information	19
Table 17:	Pattern of Parents' Responses to Teachers' Requests	20
Table 18:	Pattern of Parents' Responses to Teachers' Comments Seeking Information	21
Table 19:	Pattern of Children's Responses to Teachers' Requests	21
Table 20:	Pattern of Children's Responses to Teachers' Comments Seeking Information	22
Table 21:	Pattern of Teachers' Responses to Parents' Requests	23
Table 22:	Pattern of Teachers' Responses to Parents' Comments Seeking Information	24

Table 23: Nature of Teachers' Responses to Parents' Comments Indicating Need for Help 25

Table 24: Distribution of Substance of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience Providing Information or Explanations 28

Table 25: Distribution of Substance of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience Providing Judgements of Value 30

Table 26: Distribution of Substance of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience Suggesting Extensions to the Program 34

INTRODUCTION

In any educational program one of the most vital elements is the relationship which is established between teacher and student. When an educational program is conducted by correspondence, opportunities for close personal contact and spontaneous interaction are severely limited and other means of establishing this relationship need to be developed.

The difficulties associated with the establishment of the teacher-student relationship are further compounded with children of pre-school age who are unable to read letters or interpret directly written materials commonly used in correspondence programs. Because of this, parents are required to play an important intermediary role in the establishment of the teacher-child relationship often interpreting the teacher's remarks or intentions to the child. This intermediary role, in turn, is likely to be affected by the parent's own relationship with the teacher. Thus the development of the relationship between teachers and parents must also be an important consideration.

Within the Pre-School Correspondence Program various forms of communications are used in the attempt to establish these relationships. When a child is enrolled parents answer a series of questions in a Background Information Sheet about the child, his family, his abilities and interests, and his health. Other regular questionnaires, known as Teacher Information Sheets, are included in the Segment packages of materials forwarded by teachers at 5–6 week intervals. Parents are expected to complete and return these sheets, after the completion of the segment, to provide information about the child's response to the program. Examples of children's work (such as paintings, pastings, threadings, and workbooks) are often included when the Teacher Information Sheets are returned.

As well as these more structured forms of communication there is an interchange of personal letters and cassette tapes between teachers and parents, and teachers and children. Birthday greetings are also sent to the children at the appropriate time. Occasionally communications are in the form of telegrams and phone calls. In a few instances, personal contact may be made when a family visiting Brisbane, calls at the Pre-School Correspondence Unit, or when a teacher visits a country town. This report provides a detailed analysis of the personal communications between parents and teachers and children and teachers through letters, tapes and the Teacher Information Sheets and, where records were available, through personal meetings. A detailed analysis of parents' views of the program is provided in McGaw, Ashby and Grant (1975). The perception of teachers will be presented in a subsequent report.

The Pre-School Correspondence Program was initiated in 1974. Its aspirations and organization are described by Ashby, McGaw and Perry (1975). The primary purpose of the evaluation reported in this paper was to provide the staff responsible for the program with analyses likely to be helpful to them in the further development of their functions. In this sense the exercise was one of formative evaluation. It would be unfair to sit in any final judgement on a program such as this so early in its development. There was so little in the way of either prior experience or available research to facilitate developments that the present evaluation will provide the beginnings of a data base on which to base the development of strategies and activities.

ANALYSIS OF INTERACTIONS

Classification of Contacts

In order to analyse these interactions it was necessary to develop a method for classifying the various types of contacts. A broad classification of the contacts was designed to provide information regarding:

(a) the initiator and the audience of the contact (i.e. parent, teacher, child);

(b) the time elapsed since previous relevant contact;

(c) the form in which the contact was made (i.e. letter, tape, information sheet, work sent in, phone call, personal visit etc.)

While this classification provided a record of certain characteristics of the contact it gave no detail of the substance of the contact. Further sets of categories were developed for this purpose.

Classification of Topics

As most contacts covered a number of subjects, the substance of each contact was broken into a series of units or 'topics' with a change in subject matter being used to identify the beginning of a new topic within the contact.

The topics were classified according to substance into three broad areas: general background, program administration, and program implementation and, within these, into finer divisions. The categories used in this classification are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Substance of Topic

General Background	Program Administration	Program Implementation
Child's disabilities	Requirements fulfilled	Program materials
Child's abilities/interests	Requirements unfulfillled	Presentation within the home
Family interests	Child's class/teacher	Child's positive response
Teacher interests	Rules of enrolment	Child's negative response
Physical surroundings	Lateness of returns	Contact with other P.S.C.P. families
Occupation descriptors		New/alternative activities
Social contacts of child		Future program reference
Social contacts of parents		Contact with teacher/parent/child
		Program/activity/objectives

Topics were also classified according to the type and stimulus of the comment. The categories used for the classification of type, designed to reveal the purpose of the comment, are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Type of Topic

Requesting (implying obligation)
Seeking information
Giving information
Explaining (offering reasons)
Approving/commending
Suggesting/extending
Disapproving
Routine
Providing (sending new activities, forms, etc.)

Where the type of comment was such that an answer was required, e.g. in a comment 'requesting' or 'seeking information', the subsequent records of communication were examined to establish whether a reply had ever been made. Accordingly the topic was further coded to show 'response' or 'no response'. Similarly, where a comment by a parent expressed concern about a child's disability or his negative response to the program, a record was kept of whether or not help was given by the teacher.

While some topics appeared to be raised in response to a prior comment or to a prior request, other comments were made spontaneously having no observable stimulus in prior communications. Accordingly, topics were classified as having been unsolicited, or as being stimulated by a prior comment, or a prior request.

In order to make these classifications, the records and transcripts of all contacts made by parents, teachers and children in the sample were duplicated so that coding could proceed without causing inconvenience to the teaching staff. All contacts made throughout the 1975 school year up to a cut-off date on 16 September were included. The coding was undertaken by one person to maximize consistency. The determination of topics and their classification was spot checked by another member of the research staff and this revealed a satisfactory level of consistency.

Thus all identifiable topics within contacts were classified according to:

(a) stimulus
(b) type
(c) substance
(d) occurrence of subsequent response (where relevant).

SAMPLE

For the overall evaluation of the Pre-School Correspondence Program, a ten per cent random sample was drawn from the total enrolment. The size of the sample was determined to a large extent by the need to visit the families to interview parents and to obtain some assessment of the children's development and abilities. The selection of the sample and its general characteristics are described in McGaw, Ashby and Grant (1975).

Of the 40 families selected, there were three who did not desire to participate, two who could not accommodate a visitor and another which had to be deleted because of the interviewer's inability to reach the home by car due to wet weather. The analyses of interactions reported in this paper were based on those 34 families remaining in the sample for the purposes of visits and interviews.

Some of the children in the sample were assigned to a common teacher, with the result that the 34 children were actually distributed among 15 teachers. This distribution is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of children in sample taught by each teacher

Teachers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	Total
Number of Children	6	3	5	2	1	2	1	3	3	2	1	2	1	1	1	34

FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION

Frequency of Contact

As shown in Table 4 a teacher, on average, made 3.8 contacts with a parent and 2.9 contacts with a child in the 33 week period. Parents and children, however, contracted teachers more frequently, with a parent averaging 5.8 contacts and a child 3.6.

Table 4: Overall and Average Frequency of Communications

Form	T–P		T–C		P–T		C–T	
	No.	Av.	No.	Av.	No.	Av.	No.	Av.
Letters	72	2.1	35	1.0	39	1.1		
Tapes	57	1.7	60	1.8	28	0.8	41	0.9
Teacher Information Sheets					128	3.8		
Other	0	0.0	4	0.1	3	0.1	2	0.1
Work sent in							88	2.6
Total	129	3.8	99	2.9	198	5.8	131	3.6

The high rate of parent-teacher contact was due to the return of the Teacher Information Sheets after the completion of each segment. These were coded as communications because there was provision within them for personal comment by the parents. Only the personalized responses to the unstructured questions in the sheets were categorized into topics and classified according to type, stimulus and substance. The despatch of the segments to the parents was not included as a teacher-parent contact because this was essentially a routine clerical function with no personalized communication.

Although the parents' rate of contact with teachers was higher than the teachers rate of contact with them, because of the availability of the routine response sheet for parents, the figures in Table 4 suggest that teachers did not respond to all the contacts made by parents. This would also seem to have been the case with children, who initiated 131 contacts with teachers while teachers initiated only 99 with them.

With regard to the number of contacts made by teachers with both parents and children, it should be noted that in some instances the teacher made a contact with a parent and a child on the one occasion. For example, one section of a tape or a letter may have been addressed to the parent while another was addressed to the child. Where this occurred two separate contacts were recorded, one between teacher/parent (T–P), and the other between teacher/child (T–C). Because of this the letters and tapes recorded in the T–P and T–C columns of Table 4 are not necessarily contacts made on different occasions. The same can be said of the tapes appearing in the P–T and C–T columns.

The frequency of usage of the various forms of contact is also interesting to note. For instance letters were used more frequently than tapes by both teachers and parents. However, in their contacts with children, teachers preferred tapes to letters.

For a correspondence program, in which the personalization of the program for the parent and child must depend on contacts other than the routine despatch of standard material, the overall frequencies of communication shown in Table 4 are surprisingly low. Teachers sent, on average, only two letters and two tapes to each parent in a period of 33 weeks. On this basis a parent could have expected a letter every 16 weeks and a tape every 20 weeks or, if the two forms are combined one personalized communication every 9 weeks.

Some of these contacts actually involved no substantive communication. They were coded as a contact, but no topics were coded within them. A better picture of the individualized communication pattern can be obtained by examining only those contacts with identifiable substance. The numbers of such contacts are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Numbers of Contacts without Substantive Comment

	T–P	T–C	P–T	C–T
Contacts without substance	11	15	82	94
Contacts with substance	118	84	116	37
Total	129	99	198	131

Some of these contacts with no identifiable topics were communications of a quite routine nature. The despatch of a sample of work from a child was coded as a contact but not further elaborated and this accounts for the large number of contacts without topics in the C–T column. In the P–T column, the large number of contacts without topics was due to teacher information sheets being returned with the structured questions answered but with no relevant elaboration in the open ended sections.

There was considerable variation among teachers in the average number of substantive contacts made with parents and children. The average number of contacts for each teacher is shown in Table 6. One teacher averaged two contacts with parents and another 5.6 With children, teachers' contacts ranged from an average of one to an average of 4.6.

Table 6: Average Number of Substantive Contacts per Family by Teachers

	Teacher														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
T–P	2.5	4.0	5.6	3.5	3.0	5.0	3.0	3.0	2.3	3.0	4.0	2.5	2.0	4.0	3.0
T–C	2.3	2.7	4.6	1.5	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.9	1.3	3.0	3.0	2.0	1.0	2.0	3.0
P–T	4.5	2.7	4.4	0.5	2.0	3.5	1.0	4.3	4.0	2.0	6.0	3.5	1.0	1.0	4.0
C–T	1.7	0.3	2.8	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.5	1.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	3.0
No. of families	6	3	5	2	1	2	1	3	3	2	1	2	1	1	1

Parents also varied in their number of contacts with teachers, with three parents making only one contact while another made six. It is interesting to note that where parents made only one contact with a teacher there was no response or contact from the child. Altogether, five children in the sample made no contacts at all with their teachers. It would appear that where there was little or no contact from the child, the teachers contacts were also less frequent, suggesting the "responsive" rather than the "initiating" nature of teacher's contacts. As shown in Table 6 teachers averaged no more than two contacts with those children who made no contact with them.

One explanation for the relatively low rate of individual contact between teachers and families is that administrative policy within the Pre-School Correspondence Unit required letters and transcripts of tapes from teachers to be approved by senior staff before mailing. This precaution, established to allow monitoring of the quality of the new program in its early years, seems actually to have become an impediment to the development of the program by slowing down the communication rate. The policy has since been changed, partly in the light of the data revealed by this analysis, and teachers now communicate with parents and children entirely on their own initiative.

Intensity of Contact

The number of topics contained within a contact is a useful index of the intensity of contacts. As shown in Table 7 teachers contacts with children contained an average of 5.9 topics, whilst their contacts with parents averaged 4.8 topics. The average number of topics contained in parents' contacts with teachers was 4.2.

Table 7: Average Number of Topics per Contact

	T–P	T–C	P–T	C–T
No. of Contacts	118	84	116	37
No. of Topics	561	493	485	173
Average	4.8	5.9	4.2	4.7

In comparing substantive contacts of children and parents with teachers it should be noted that children's contacts were less frequent and were generally in the form of a tape. A feature of these tapes was the brevity of the individual topics which, typical of children of this age level were generally no more than a sentence in length. The number of them tended to elevate the mean above that for the parents whose communications with the teachers were more sustained, even if raising fewer topics. The following extract from a child's tape, which contains three separate topics, illustrates this.

> "We had Grandma here to-day. When Mummy was in town she bought me a raincoat. I like doing the work book and I like Mummy reading the stories you sent."

There was considerable variation among teachers in the number of topics raised. For instance while one teacher averaged only 2.5 topics in a total of 5 contacts with parents, another averaged 6.1 in a total of 28 contacts. Among parents the variations were even greater, with three parents raising only one topic in their contacts with teachers whilst another averaged 12.9 over a total of six contacts.

The distribution of topics within contacts, shown in Table 8, reveals that a substantial proportion of the contacts made by both teachers and parents with each other contained fewer than 4 topics. However, nearly half of all teachers contacts with children contained more than five topics with eight of these containing between 11 and 15 topics. In those contacts with larger numbers of topics, the topics tended to comprise a series of brief separate issues.

Table 8: Distribution of Topics within Contacts

	T–P		T–C		P–T		C–T	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Fewer than 4 topics/contact	54	45.8	23	27.4	69	59.5	16	43.2
4–5 topics/contact	28	23.7	21	25.0	17	14.6	10	27.0
More than 5 topics/contact	36	30.5	40	47.6	30	25.9	11	29.8
Total	118	100.0	84	100.0	116	100.0	37	100.0

When the distribution of topics is examined in relation to the form of contact, it can be seen that tapes provide the medium for the most extended comments. The distributions are shown in Table 9. Although only 45 per cent of all contacts were made by tapes, over 59 per cent of all topics were raised through this medium. This makes clear the extent to which parties tended to raise relatively more issues while using tapes. In fact, for tapes the mean number of topics raised per contact was 6.6 whereas for letters is was 4.4.

Table 9: Distribution of Topics within Contacts by Form of Contact

		Letter	Tape	Teacher Information Sheet	Other	Work sent in	Total
Contacts	No.	142	159	50	2	2	355
	%	40.0	44.8	14.0	0.6	0.6	100.0
Topics	No.	652	1044	82	10	2	1763
	%	35.4	59.2	4.7	.6	.1	100.0
Average Topic/Contact		4.4	6.6	1.6	5.0	1	5.0

There was, however, an average of five topics raised in the two contacts shown in the column marked 'other'. These contacts represented a telephone conversation and a personal contact made when a parent visited the Pre-School Correspondence Unit. The number of topics was derived from the notes teachers made of these, which highlighted the main points of discussions and can, therefore, be regarded as a conservative estimate. Nevertheless, the comparatively high number of topics raised in these contacts, points to the obvious advantages of direct person to person contact. While such direct contact may not often be feasible in a correspondence program of this nature, the distribution of topics suggests that the use of tapes is a valuable alternative in promoting interaction.

Time Lag between Contacts

The time lag between contacts, calculated as the number of days elapsed between the initiation of a contact and the date of response, reflects on the efficiency and interests of all participants.

With this method of calculation the time taken for mail to travel one way is included in the time lag. Any comparisons made among teachers would be biased in favour of those teachers whose students were closest to Brisbane but comparisons of teachers with parents would be unaffected by any differential in postal delays.

As shown in Table 10, 26 per cent of parents' contacts and 22 per cent of children's contacts were responded to within 10 days by teachers. Parents and children, on the other hand, tended not to reply so promptly with only 15 per cent of teachers' contacts being responded to within ten days by parents. The greatest percentage of teacher's responses to parents and children was made within 11-20 days whilst the greatest percentage of parents and children's responses were made within a 41-50 day period.

Table 10: Time Lag between successive contacts with Opposite Parties

	T–P		T–C		P–T		C–T	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1–10	28	26.4	16	22.2	22	15.4	13	12.6
11.–20	30	28.3	23	31.9	21	1.47	15	14.6
21–30	19	17.9	11	15.3	21	14.7	14	13.6
31–40	10	9.4	9	12.5	19	13.3	11	10.7
41–50	6	5.7	2	2.8	26	18.2	24	23.3
51–60	5	4.7	4	5.6	12	8.4	6	5.8
61–70	2	1.9	2	2.8	14	9.8	10	9.7
71–80	3	2.8	1	1.4	2	1.4	2	1.9
81–90	1	0.9	1	1.4	1	0.7	3	2.9
91+	2	1.9	3	4.2	5	3.5	5	4.9

Although a prompt response by teachers to children's contacts would seem essential in establishing relationships and providing relevant comments on work sent in, only 54 per cent of children's contacts were responded to within 20 days. The remainder of responses were made in periods ranging from 21 to 91 days or more. In fact five children's contacts were not responded to before 90 days had elapsed. The value of any comments made about work sent in or about activities a child engaged in three months earlier must be seriously questioned.

It should be remembered that the results shown in Table 10 represent only those contacts to which a response was made. As mentioned previously there were a number of contacts made by parents and children to which teachers made no response at all.

There was also a number of instances where two or more contacts were initiated by one party before a response was given. It can be seen from Table 11 that there were 26 instances in which teachers made two contacts with parents and children before receiving a reply. There were, however, 29 instances of parents and children making two consecutive contacts before a response was despatched by the teacher.

Although teachers made no more than two contacts before receiving a response there were seven occasions on which parents and children made three consecutive contacts before a response was despatched and two instances where children made four contacts before a response was despatched.

Table 11: Frequency of Multiple Contacts before Reply

Number of contacts before reply	T–P	T–C	P–T	C–T
2	21	5	16	13
3	0	0	0	3
4	0	0	0	2

These delays in responding to contacts have had adverse effects on all parties, in some instances inhibiting the development of relationships as well as diminishing enthusiasm. Parents views of teachers' response rates and the effectiveness of such communications are presented in McGaw, Ashby and Grant (1975). Since these contacts are such an integral part of the program, it would seem essential that long time delays, particularly on the part of teachers, be eliminated wherever possible.

PROPERTIES OF INTERACTIONS

Stimuli for Comments

Topics raised in contacts between parties were identified as having been unsolicited, or in direct response to a prior request, or in reaction to some prior comment by the other party. In the case of teacher-child contacts, those which fell in the last of these three categories included reactions to work sent in by the child.

As shown in Table 12 there was considerable variation between teachers, parents and children in the stimuli for comment. For parents, almost 70 per cent of topics raised were unsolicited. For teachers, almost 70 per cent of topics discussed were either responses to parents' questions or reactions to parents' comments. Similarly, over 60 per cent of teachers' comments to children were based on prior comments made by children on tapes, or in response to work sent in.

Table 12: Stimulus for Comment

	T–P		T–C		P–T		C–T	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Unsolicited	177	31.5	190	38.5	336	69.3	143	82.7
Prior request	29	5.2	5	1.2	91	18.8	29	16.7
Prior comment	355	63.3	297	60.3	58	11.9	1	0.6
Total	561	100.0	493	100.0	485	100.0	173	100.0

Those families which communicated least tended to receive least. This pattern is consistent with that view of early childhood education which casts the teacher in the role of a responder or follower of expressed interests and child initiated contacts rather than a stimulator and initiator.

In fact, it is not surprising that the teacher's role, particularly during the early months of the correspondence program, followed this pattern. The teacher depended very much on feedback to determine the direction to be taken in further development. Whether the degree of responsiveness charged over time as the teacher acquired more information about the child could not be determined because the actual rate of communication was not sufficiently high for any systematic analysis of changes over time.

The nature of the interaction can be more clearly seen, however, if the stimulus for comments are analysed in relation to the type and substance of the comment. Analyses of this type are presented in subsequent sections.

Types of Comments

Within each contact, the separately identified topics were classified according to type into the categories listed in Table 2. The overall distribution of topics in these categories is shown in Table 13, separately for each of the four possible initiator-audience combinations. There were substantial differences between teachers and parents in the number of routine comments made and in the extent to which they gave information. Routine comments (i.e. those which appeared to have no specific purpose, other than to acknowledge a previous remark or contact) accounted for 20.9 per cent of teachers comments to parents and 17.4 per cent of their comments to children. In contrast, children made no routine comments and only 4.5 per cent of parents comments to teachers were of a routine nature. A more detailed analysis of the referents of these routine comments is given later. These comments provided no professional comment or judgement by the teachers and it is, therefore, somewhat surprising that such a large proportion of teachers' comments should have been of this type. It is, of course, difficult to determine what should be a reasonable base level for routine comments in correspondence between teachers and parents, but it is clear that the correspondence between teachers and parents served a substantial clerical function.

The distribution of the other types of teacher comments coded provides a useful indicator of the extent to which teachers used 'professional' skills. For instance the amount of information teachers sought and gave, the frequency of explanations and suggestions and the amount of approval and disapproval shown can all be regarded as descriptors of teaching.

The requesting comments, which differ from those seeking information in that they imply an obligation to respond, accounted for 5.5 per cent of teachers comments to parents and 7.7 per cent of teachers comments to children. Comments seeking information were similarly distributed accounting for 10.1 per cent of teachers comments to children and 6.1 per cent of their comments to parents. Some information was routinely sought, of course, on the teachers' behalf through the Teacher Information Sheets. Parents and children, on the other hand, sought information even less frequently although the proportion of parents' comments concerned with requests for information was higher than that for any other group.

In the light of the expressed aim of the Pre-School Correspondence Program to individualize the program and establish personal relationships between teachers and families, it might have been expected that both the absolute number and the proportion

Table 13: Distribution of Types of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience

	T–P		T–C		P–T		C–T	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Routine	117	20.8	86	17.5	22	4.5	0	0.0
Requesting information	31	5.5	38	7.7	37	7.6	1	0.6
Seeking information	34	6.1	50	10.1	18	3.7	1	0.6
Giving information	138	24.6	110	22.3	312	64.3	119	68.8
Explaining	37	6.6	0	0.0	43	8.9	1	0.6
Approving	124	22.1	112	22.7	38	7.9	0	0.0
Suggesting	51	9.1	22	4.5	1	0.2	0	0.0
Providing	29	5.2	75	15.2	9	1.9	51	29.4
Disapproving	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	1.0	0	0.0
TOTAL	561	100.0	493	100.0	485	100.0	173	100.0

of teacher comments which sought or directly requested information would have been greater. Unless the parents volunteered the information without solicitation or provided it sufficiently through the Teacher Information Sheets, it is difficult to see how teachers could have adequately established a child's interests and abilities, and his response to the program. Certainly a substantial proportion of the parents' comments involved the provision of information. The substance of these parent comments is considered in detail later in this paper, however, when the stimuli for these comments are examined it is interesting to note that 71.2 per cent of those from parents, and 86.6 per cent of those from children, were actually unsolicited. That is, most of the information parents and children provided was in no direct way stimulated by teachers either through personal communication or through the standard Teacher Information Sheets. Such a high proportion of spontaneously given information may well have lessened the need for teachers to seek information from parents and children. This can not readily be judged, however, without an examination of the substance of the information provided. This examination is undertaken in later sections.

It is interesting to note that 'giving information' accounted for 24.6 per cent of teachers' comments to parents and 22.7 per cent of their comments to children. Although this is well below the percentage of such comments made by parents and children, it was the type of comment most frequently made by teachers to parents.

Although the explaining type of comment was relatively infrequent, in all source-audience combinations, the parent-teacher combination had the highest with 8.9 per cent. Teachers, however, offered no explanations to children and only 6.6 per cent of their comments to parents were of an explanatory nature. These findings are also somewhat surprising in the light of expected teacher behaviour in normal classroom settings where explanations to children are an integral part of a teacher's role. The fact that correspondence teachers made no explanations to children raises the question of whether teachers in a correspondence setting can be sufficiently aware of what a child wants or needs to know, to be able to make an appropriate explanation at an appropriate time. The results suggest that the teachers accepted the need to work through the parents for this purpose.

If it is argued that parents assumed this aspect of the teaching role, with teachers being a resource for them, it could have been expected that teachers would have more frequently provided explanations regarding program presentation. A detailed analysis of the substance of these explanatory comments, which is given later, provides a clearer picture of the function of the various comments made. It should be noted, of course, that there was a considerable amount of explanation in the standard program materials but the members of the development team responsible for these materials were distinct from those in the teaching team, who were responsible for individualizing the program (Ashby, McGaw and Perry, 1975). It is the role of the teaching staff which is the subject of the analysis in this paper.

Comments of approval were an important feature of teachers comments to parents and children, accounting respectively for 22.1 per cent and 22.7 per cent of all comments. Parents in contrast made comparatively few approving remarks and children none at all. Such comments of approval by teachers would seem to be appropriate to their supportive teaching role. As a means of reinforcement, however, their effect would have been much attenuated by the delays in response. Parents reported that children had often forgotten the work they had sent in by the time they received the teachers comments upon it. The role of these comments of approval can be seen more clearly in the analysis of their substance presented later in the paper.

Comments which made suggestions or extended ideas and interests accounted for only 9.1 per cent of teachers comments to parents and 4.5 per cent of their comments to children. As with the explaining type comments, these percentages and the number of such comments seem surprisingly low in the light of expected teacher behaviour. The assumption and the declared intention in the program was that the teachers would be able to obtain sufficient information about the children for whom they were responsible to individualize the program. No individualization occurred in the distribution of the materials prepared by the development team, although some individualization would undoubtedly have occurred through the parents' selection and organization of the program for their children. What is evident from Table 13, is that the teaching team provided very few comments which could have been interpreted as providing extension, elaboration or variation of the program.

Classification in the 'providing' type of comment denoted the actual provision of supplementary materials such as additional taped stories or work sheets, and in some instances in the case of child-teacher interactions, the singing of a song or the saying of a rhyme. As was to be expected a relatively high percentage (29.5 per cent) of children's comments to teachers and 15.2 per cent of teachers comments to children were of this type. Such provision would seem an important adjunct in any individualization of the program. The substance of these provisions is analysed in more detail later.

Disapproval was very seldom expressed at all and then only by parents to teachers. The substance of the five disapproving comments is analysed later in the paper.

Substance of Comments

The preceding analyses provided a summary of the types of comments made in all communications between parties in the sample. From a different perspective another overview can be obtained by examining the substance of these comments. More detailed analyses of the substance of different types of comments between different parties are provided later in the paper but, for this overview, the comments from all parties, parents, children and teachers are included. Table 14 provides a summary of the substance of all their comments within the different categories of type.

Comments of approval made in relation to the child's positive response to the program occurred more frequently than any other comment. Such comments were made on 171 occasions and accounted for 10 per cent of all comments. An example, from a teacher child interaction, is "I liked the way you cut around the pictures on the back page of the workbook because it was very neat."

In addition to these comments of approval there were 52 comments of a routine nature relating to the child's positive response. An example, again from a teacher-child communication, is "Thank you for sending me your drawings and paintings. It was a nice surprise when I opened Mummy's parcel and found them there." This type of comment was classified as routine rather than approving because, despite its obvious warmth, it contained no comment on the child's actual work or performance.

The frequency of comments relating to the child's positive response to the program would seem to be indicative of the attempts of teachers and parents, in their communications, to focus on the child and, in particular, on the positive aspects of his response to the program.

The next most frequently occurring comments were those which gave information about the child's abilities and interests. Of the 281 comments dealing with this topic, 130 involved the provision of information. There were also 50 routine type comments made about this. Comments giving information relating to the interests of teachers and the interests and activities of families accounted for 4.1 and 3.5 per cent of all comments respectively. Though they occurred less frequently than comments providing information about the child, they do reveal the extent of the interchange of personalized information between the parties in an attempt to provide a good basis for the establishment of relationships between teachers, and parents and children. However, the fact that some parents expressed dissatisfaction with their relationship with teachers and indicated that teachers did not understand their situation (McGaw, Ashby and Grant, 1975) would seem to indicate that, in some cases at least, the information exchange was inadequate. Teachers need to understand the context of a families' interests and activities as well as to consider the appropriateness of the information they give about their own activities. While some teachers seemed quickly to establish rapport with the families, by providing anecdotes of their own children, or their own home and work experiences, some tended to give details about expensive holidays and other activities beyond the experience of the families, particularly those most affected by recent adverse economic conditions in rural areas.

Of the total number of comments made, 9.2 per cent dealt with new or alternative activities. Among these, 48 comments involved suggestions about ways of extending the program and 83 referred to, or involved directly, the provision of new or alternative

Table 14: Overall Distribution of Comments by Type and Substance

Substance of Comment	Type of Comment									Total
	Routine	Requesting Information	Seeking Information	Giving Information	Explaining	Approving	Suggesting	Providing	Disapproving	
Background Information										
Child's disabilities	1	6	6	33	0	0	3	1	0	50
Child's abilities & interests	50	19	47	130	0	22	4	9	0	281
Family interests	13	1	2	60	0	0	0	0	0	76
Teacher interests	3	21	1	70	0	1	0	8	0	85
Physical surroundings	10	0	3	36	0	1	0	0	0	50
Occupation descriptors	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	3
Child's social contacts	6	0	1	15	0	1	0	0	0	23
Parent's social contacts	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Sub Total	84	28	61	347	0	25	7	18	0	570
Administrative Detail										
Requirements fulfilled	22	2	0	4	1	11	0	0	0	40
Requirements unfulfilled	5	17	11	7	4	0	0	5	0	49
Child's class	10	1	1	78	0	2	0	0	0	92
Rules of enrolment	0	5	8	6	8	1	0	0	2	30
Lateness of returns	9	0	0	1	29	0	0	0	0	39
Sub Total	46	25	20	96	42	14	0	5	2	250
Program Usage										
Program materials	18	11	11	65	11	26	6	8	1	157
Presentation in home	7	3	3	27	8	25	5	0	0	78
Child's positive response	52	28	6	53	3	171	0	50	0	363
Child's negative response	7	0	1	48	11	1	3	0	0	71
Contact with P.S.C.P. families	3	0	1	6	1	0	1	0	0	12
New/alternative activities	3	8	0	1	1	4	48	83	0	158
Future program reference	1	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	10
Contact with parent/teacher/child	4	4	0	17	3	8	4	0	2	42
Program/activity objectives	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Sub Total	95	54	22	236	39	235	67	58	3	892
Grand Total	225	107	103	679	81	274	74	164	5	1712

activities. Considering that these two categories are the major indicators of the extent to which the program is individualized, they were surprisingly infrequently used.

A similar number of comments, 157, dealt with program materials. Of these, 65 involved the provision of information and 26 were expressions of approval. From the point of view of individualization, 6 comments involved the suggestion of extensions to the program while 8 referred to, or involved the direct provision of, supplementary materials with which to extend the program.

Comments about the child's class were mostly comments about other children in the district for whom the teacher was also responsible. These comments were mostly made in the teacher's introductory letter to parents and children and were aimed at establishing some kind of group feeling. Almost all of these comments simply provided information or were routine in character. Relatively few comments of any type were made about the social contacts of parents and descriptors of occupation. There was also surprisingly little reference made to the objectives of the program, with there being only one instance of a program objective being explained. Similarly there were only 10 comments made in relation to future program materials, 9 of which gave information about topics or activities that would be included in later segments.

This overview indicates the overall pattern of comments made in the communications between teachers and parents and children with respect to the type and the substance of the comments. More detailed analyses of the substance of each type of comment are provided in the remaining sections of the paper.

ANALYSES OF COMMENTS

Routine Comments

The substance of all routine comments made in communications between teachers and parents and children is shown in Table 15. The table reveals that teachers made routine comments to parents on all but four of the subjects coded and that the routine comments were evenly distributed among the broad substantive categories of background information, administrative detail and program usage.

The highest percentage, 18.8 per cent of these routine comments referred to requirements that had been fulfilled and were mostly stimulated by the return of the completed teacher information sheets. The child's positive response to the program was also the subject of a relatively high 14.5 per cent of teachers' routine comments to parents.

Of teachers' routine comments to children 37.1 per cent were also made in relation to their positive response to the program. However teachers directed even more of their routine comments (47.6 per cent) to evidence of the child's abilities and interests. The following is an example of such a comment.

> Teacher to child: "Thank you for speaking to me on the tape. I did enjoy hearing all your news. Haven't you been busy. You must have had a lovely holiday at the coast."

Such routine comments, apart from assuring the audience that their correspondence has been received and read or listened to, accomplished little. They may, however, have served as links to introduce ensuing topics. For instance, in the case of the example cited above, the teacher went on to remark, "I went down (to the coast) for a few days

Table 15: Distribution of Substance of Routine Comments from Each Source to Each Audience

Substance of Comment	T–P		T–C		P–T		C–T	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Background Information								
Child's disabilities	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	
Child's abilities & interests	9	7.7	41	47.6	0	0.0	0	
Family interests	12	10.2	1	1.2	0	0.0	0	
Teacher interests	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	13.6	0	
Physical surroundings	8	6.8	1	1.2	1	4.6	0	
Occupation descriptors	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0		
Child's social contacts	4	3.4	2	2.3	0	0.0	0	
Parent's social contacts	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	
Sub Total	35	29.9	45	52.3	4	18.2	0	
Administrative Detail								
Requirements fulfilled	22	18.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	
Requirements unfulfilled	4	3.4	1	1.2	0	0.0	0	
Child's class	4	3.4	1	1.2	5	22.6	0	
Rules of enrolment	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	
Lateness of segments	6	5.1	0	0.0	3	13.6	0	
Sub Total	36	30.7	2	2.4	8	36.2	0	
Program Usage								
Program materials	11	9.4	4	4.6	3	13.6	0	
Presentation in home	7	6.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	
Child's positive response	17	14.5	32	37.1	3	13.6	0	
Child's negative response	5	4.3	1	1.2	1	4.6	0	
Contact with P.S.C.P. families	1	0.9	1	1.2	1	4.6	0	
New/alternative activities	2	1.7	0	0.0	1	4.6	0	
Future program reference	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	
Contact with parent/teacher/child	2	1.7	1	1.2	1	4.5	0	
Program/activity objectives	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	
Sub Total	46	39.4	39	45.3	10	45.6	0	
Grand Total	117	100.0	86	100.0	22	100.0	0	

with my family but it was windy and overcast", which provided a little information about the teachers' own activities.

In contrast to teachers, parents made very few routine comments. The highest number, five (22.6 per cent) related to neighbouring children for whom the teacher was also responsible (i.e. to the "child's class"). Three routine comments were made about each of the following: teachers' interests; lateness of segments; program materials; and the child's positive response to the program. There were no instances of a routine comment made by a child to a teacher.

In considering the form in which such routine comments were made it is interesting to note that 68.2 per cent of parents' routine comments were made in letters and the remainder in tapes or teacher information sheets. While teachers routine comments to parents were made with relatively similar frequency in both letters and tapes, 48.7 and 51.3 per cent respectively, 76.7 per cent of their routine comments to children occurred in tapes and only 23.3 per cent in letters.

Routine comments were a prominent feature of teachers' interactions, accounting for 20.9 per cent of all their comments to parents and 17.5 per cent of all their comments to children. They were, however, far less prominent in parents' and children's interactions with teachers. While these routine comments may serve as a useful means of 'acknowledgement' and provide a link for subsequent topics, their contribution to an educational program is questionable. A danger would seem to lie in their somewhat deceptive lack of content. Many routine comments had about them the appearance of a reinforcing comment simply because they referred to something which was approved, such as the child's work, but the lack of detail or any extended reference minimized any feedback value they may have had to parents or children.

Requests

In contrast to the routine comments, which covered virtually the entire substantive range, requests and comments seeking information seemed to focus on a few particular issues. The distribution of the substance of comments of these types for all combinations of source and audience is given in Table 16.

The substance of most requests directed from parents to teachers was requirements which had not been fulfilled. Of these 14 were requests implying an obligation on parents to answer and 10 sought information with some degree of option about replying. The difference in the strength of the demand for an answer is illustrated in the following examples.

Requesting Comment

(Teacher to parent) "Earlier this term J--- was sent some library books which have not been returned as yet. Would you return these as soon as possible so they can be recycled for the use of other children."

Comment Seeking Information

(Teacher to parent) "As I have not received the Teacher Information Sheet from Segment 1, I am wondering if the program is presenting any difficulties for you, or whether your returned information has been lost in the mail."

Table 16: Distribution of Substance of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience Requesting and Seeking Information

	T–P				T–C				P–T				C–T			
	Request		Seek		Request		Seek		Request		Seek		Request		Seek	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Background Information																
Child's disabilities	3	9.7	5	14.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	8.1	1	5.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's abilities & interests	2	6.4	2	5.9	17	44.8	43	86.0	0	0.0	2	11.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Family interests	1	3.2	1	3.0	9	0.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Teacher interests	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.7	0	0.0	1	100.0	1	100.0
Physical surroundings	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	6.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Occupation descriptors	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's social contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Parent's social contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	6	19.3	8	23.6	17	44.8	49	98.0	4	10.8	3	16.6	1	100.0	1	100.0
Administrative Detail																
Requirements fulfilled	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	5.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Requirements unfulfilled	14	45.2	10	29.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	8.1	1	5.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's class	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.7	1	5.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
Rules of enrolment	2	6.4	4	11.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	8.1	4	22.2	0	0.0	0	0.0
Lateness of segments	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	16	51.6	14	41.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	9	24.3	6	33.4	0	0.0	0	0.0
Program Usage																
Program materials	3	9.7	3	8.8	1	2.6	0	0.0	7	18.9	8	44.4	0	0.0	0	0.0
Presentation in home	0	0.0	3	8.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	8.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's positive response	6	19.4	5	14.7	20	52.6	1	2.0	2	5.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's negative response	0	0.0	1	2.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Contact with P.S.C.P. families	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
New/alternative activities	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	21.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Future program reference	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Contact with parent/teacher/child	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	10.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Program/activity objectives	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	9	29.1	12	35.2	21	55.2	1	2.0	24	64.9	9	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Grand Total	31	100.0	34	100.0	38	100.0	50	100.0	37	100.0	18	100.0	1	100.0	1	100.0

The other subjects about which teachers made requests or sought information were concerned with the child's positive and negative response to the program; the child's abilities and disabilities; family interests, program materials and rules of enrolment.

Of the comments which involved explicit requests by teachers, 26 (84 per cent) were unsolicited while approximately half of those seeking information were evoked by a prior comment. Most of the requests (84 per cent) were made in letter form while the teachers' more general attempts to seek information were divided evenly between letters and tapes.

These two types of comments combined accounted for 11.6 per cent of all teachers' comments to parents. While it could be anticipated that such 'requests' could provide a useful means for gathering information upon which to base an individualized program, an examination of the substance of such comments reveals that approximately 46 per cent were concerned with administrative matters such as unfulfilled requirements and rules of enrolment. Although it is natural that parents' slowness or failure to meet requirements would concern teachers and evoke such comment it is surprising that not more information was sought about the child's background and about program usage. It is possible, of course, that the regular teacher information sheets captured all the information the teachers needed without any supplementary questionning being necessary. The extent to which teachers did have to follow up parents about administrative matters does raise some doubts about the appropriateness of the rules and requirements for parents. Failure to have fulfilled requirements, for instance, may have indicated that too much was being asked of parents or, at least, that parents did not accept the urgency of some requirements.

The response rate of parents to the requests made by teachers is summarized in Table 17. Of the 31 requests, 17 were answered, while 9 remained unanswered. There were also five instances of requests being made within four weeks of the cut off date which was judged to have allowed insufficient time for a response to have been made. Thus, parents responded to only two thirds of the explicit requests of teachers despite the clear obligation to reply imposed on them in the request.

Table 17: Pattern of Parents' Responses to Teachers' Requests

Substance of Requests	Answered	Not Answered	No time for reply
Childs disabilities	2	1	0
Childs abilities/interests	2	0	0
Family interests	1	0	0
Requirements unfufilled	8	4	2
Rules of enrolment	1	0	1
Program material	2	1	0
Childs positive response	1	3	2
TOTAL	17	9	5

The response rate of parents to teacher comments seeking information, which is summarized in Table 18, was lower than that for requests. Only 17 of the 34 comments for which answers could have been expected had, in fact, been answered. The lower response rate for this type of request was probably due to the lower level of demand in

the comment. An interesting feature of both sets of responses is that failure to respond was greatest when an already unfulfilled requirement was the subject of the comment. To keep these figures in perspective, however, it needs to be remembered that 34 families were involved so the failure in response was not high.

Table 18: Pattern of Parents' Responses to Teachers' Comments Seeking Information

Substance of Information Sought	Answered	Not Answered	No time for reply
Child's disabilities	5	0	0
Child's abilities	0	2	0
Family interests	0	0	1
Requirements unfulfilled	6	4	0
Rules of enrolment	0	3	1
Program materials	0	1	2
Presentation in home	3	0	0
Child's positive response	3	2	0
Child's negative response	0	1	0
TOTAL	17	13	4

Teachers directed requests to children on very few issues, as shown in Table 16. Explicit requests and comments seeking information were concerned essentially with the child's abilities and interests and with positive aspects of the child's response to the program. The response rates of the children to requests from the teachers are shown in Table 19. Despite the implied obligation to respond to the requests only 54 per cent of them were answered. The main focus for teachers' requests was the child's positive response to the program. Requests included such comments as "I'd love to hear you speak to me on the tape", or "Would you send me some of your paintings and drawings please?"

Table 19: Pattern of Children's Responses to Teachers' Requests

Substance of Requests	Answered	Not Answered	No time for reply
Child's abilities	7	10	0
Program materials	0	1	0
Child's positive response	12	5	3
TOTAL	19	16	3

Among the comments from teachers to children seeking information the most frequent were those concerned with the child's abilities or interests. The stimuli for 36 of these 43 comments were prior comments made by the child or his parent about things such as

the child's pets, his garden, his favourite activities, his holidays or his latest fishing trip. The following quotes from tapes made by a child and his teacher illustrate this.

Stimulus

(Child to teacher) "When Mummy was in (town) she bought me a raincoat".

Comment Seeking Information

(Teacher to child) "Is your new raincoat bright yellow? Did you have your new raincoat for the rainy weather?"

Although many such comments were coded as seeking information, because they were phrased in the form of a question, many tended to function more as "chatty comments" rather than as direct questions. In light of the time lag between the stimulus of the teacher's comment and the child's next contact, it is not surprising that 60 per cent of teachers' comments seeking information remained unanswered. The response rates are shown in Table 20.

Table 20: Pattern of Children's Responses to Teachers' Comments Seeking Information

Substance of Information Sought	Answered	Not Answered	No time for reply
Child's abilities	17	23	3
Family interests	0	1	0
Physical surroundings	0	3	0
Occupation	0	1	0
Social contacts of child	0	1	0
Child's positive response	0	1	0
TOTAL	17	30	3

The children may well have responded openly and directly but not in a form registrable by the correspondence teacher. It is quite likely that children, on playing the teacher's tape, or having the teacher's letter read to them would spontaneously have replied to such comments. The fact that the teacher remains unaware of the response and, to that extent uninformed, is one of the essential problems of correspondence education with such young children. It highlights a need for opportunities for more personal contacts.

When combined, requests and comments seeking information accounted for 17.8 per cent of all teachers comments to children. In view of the low recorded response rate to these types of comment, which can in part be attributed to the time lag, it would appear that teachers receive little reinforcement from children from these attempts to get information.

An examination of the requests parents made of teachers, shown in Table 16, reveals that parents made more explicit requests of teachers than teachers did of parents but less often sought information from them. Of the 37 requests, eight were concerned with new ideas and activities. Some of these were made by parents on their children's behalf. One parent, for instance, requested that the teacher sing some of her child's favourite songs on a tape while another requested more work sheets because her child had enjoyed the work book

activities so much. Other requests, however, were more concerned with parents' needs. One parent requested ideas for presenting a particular activity, while another wanted to know what foods she could give to her child which were tart or pungent to complete an activity which had been suggested in the program.

Program materials constituted another main subject for these requests. Information was sought about the right consistency for clay, or the reasons for which the salt ceramic didn't set, and requests were made in regard to such things as borrowing of tape recorders.

As with teachers, a high percentage of parents' requests were made spontaneously with only five being stimulated by a prior request or prior comment.

Teachers, however, had a higher answering rate than did parents. As shown in Table 21, of the 36 requests made of teachers by parents, seven remained unanswered while there were an additional nine requests for which there had been insufficient time for a reply. Of the 18 comments which sought information only three were not answered, as shown in Table 22. Overall, then, of both explicit requests and comments seeking information, teachers had answered 75 per cent.

Table 21: Pattern of Teachers' Responses to Parents' Requests

Substance of Requests	Answered	Not Answered	No time for reply
Child's disabilities	0	2	1
Teachers interests	0	0	1
Requirements fulfilled	2	0	0
Requirements unfulfilled	3	0	0
Child's class	1	0	0
Rules of Enrolment	2	0	1
Program materials	6	0	1
Presentation in home	2	0	1
Child's Positive Response	2	0	0
New Activities	2	3	3
Contact with teacher	0	2	1
TOTAL	20	7	9

While this percentage was high, it is surprising that even a small number should remain unanswered, for it would seem essential to the success of the program, that parents feel that teachers are supporting them in their teaching role. A quick and helpful response to any query from a parent would appear essential for engendering confidence and developing meaningful teacher/parent relationships. (Parents' views on this aspect are presented in McGaw, Ashby and Grant, 1975).

There would seem to be no apparent reason why teachers failed to answer some of these requests. Although it could be suggested that the subject matter was such that answers are not warranted, an analysis of the correspondence did not suggest this had been the case. Even such an important matter as a request for help regarding a child's disability remained unanswered on two occasions. An alternative possibility is that teachers were unable to answer such 'requests', either because they had insufficient information about the nature of

Table 22: Pattern of Teachers' Responses to Parents' Comments Seeking Information

Substance of Information Sought	Answered	Not Answered	No time to reply
Child's disabilities	0	0	1
Child's abilities	0	1	1
Requirements unfufilled	1	0	0
Child's class	0	0	1
Rules of enrolment	2	0	2
Program materials	6	2	0
Contact with Pre-School Correspondence Program families	1	0	0
TOTAL	10	3	5

the problem or because they did not know how to answer such requests in a correspondence situation. One explanation of tardiness in reply, rather than failure to reply was an administrative requirement within the Pre-School Correspondence Unit that all correspondence from teachers be approved by supervising administrative staff before despatch. While this might have provided a valuable means for monitoring the development of the new venture it may well have been counter productive. The policy, as was mentioned earlier, was changed late in 1975 partly in the light of these data.

There was only one instance of a request from a child to a teacher and only one instance of a child seeking information from a teacher. Both of these, as shown in Table 16, involved questions about the teacher. One child wanted to know the teacher's favourite colour while another requested a photograph of her new teacher. One child had been answered. The other's request had been received less than four weeks before the cut-off date for the data gathering and had not been answered by that time. The fact that children made so few requests is to be expected because of their pre-operational stage of development where requests must be met without too much delay. Their parents would probably have answered their requests and provided them with the information they sought at the time of asking. This serves to emphasize the importance of the parent's role in the correspondence program and emphasizes the extent to which the teachers expertise will be mediated through the parents to the children.

In their relation to parents and, in particular, in their role in responding to parent's requests for help and information the teachers played a role which was very much one of support. Major tasks for the staff are to develop parents' willingness to call on the support, to expand their view of the range of support available, and to develop more efficient and complete modes of support to be offered by the teachers.

Teachers' Responsiveness to Parents' Concerns

In a number of different ways, parents made references to their child's disabilities or to aspects of his negative response to the program. All comments of this type were noted and coded to indicate whether a response had been made by the teacher and, if so, whether the response involved the provision of help.

As shown in Table 23, 68 comments made by parents were judged to express concern and to require help or explanation from the teacher. The following are examples of such comments.

Parent to teacher: "L--- seems to be a very slow learner but tries hard".

"If J--- saw the colour he could find one that was similar but he could not tell me what colours they were."

Although in a few instances such comments were made in the form of a request, or at least as a comment seeking information, most were, like the examples given above, in the category of comments coded as 'giving information'. The fact that so few were expressed in the form of an explicit question or request could possibly account for only 28, out of the 56 for which there had been time for reply, having been given a response.

Table 23: Nature of Teachers' Responses to Parents' Comments indicating Need for Help

	Help given	No help given	Unknown	Total
Child's disabilities	3	12	5	20
Child's negative response	24	16	8	48
TOTAL	27	28	13	68

A helpful response appeared more likely where the problem was related to the child's negative response to the program. Help was given for 24 of the 40 comments, excluding the eight for which responses might not have been prepared by the cut-off date. Where the problem was concerned with the child's disability, for example a learning problem or a speech difficulty, help was given in only three of the 15 cases for which responses could have been expected at the time.

The fact that the teachers seemed more ready to deal with evidence of a child's negative response to the program is not surprising. For one thing, there was considerable staff investment in it. The problems parents raised included a child's dislike of or difficulty with a particular activity, his reluctance to respond to the music and movement tapes and his difficulty in concentrating on certain tasks. Since most of the teachers would have encountered similar kinds of problems in their previous teaching experience, they could fairly readily have provided constructive and practical suggestions about ways of overcoming these problems. This probably highlights a need for correspondence staff to have had practical experience in conventional pre-school units before attempting to work in the more artificial correspondence program. Among 1976 staff appointments are some beginning teachers for whom the types of parent concern may cause problems.

The teacher's assessment of the nature and extent of problems can only be made on the basis of information provided by the parent. The possibility that parents may distort the picture of the problem cannot be overlooked, given the parent's total involvement in the situation and close relationship with the child. Yet, since that is all the teacher has to depend on, it is important that the teachers develop the skills needed to elicit relevant information.

Where the parent's need for help related to a perceived disability of the child's, the difficulties for the teacher in obtaining adequate and accurate information on which to base an assessment were probably much greater than in cases where the need was more

directly related to the program activities. The disabilities mentioned by parents fell into broad categories associated with medical disabilities, emotional and behaviour problems, and those learning and speech difficulties.

While teachers may, by skilful probing, elicit sufficient factual information to enable them to make some assessment of the problem it would appear from Table 23 that this was seldom even attempted. The fact that so few helpful suggestions were made suggests that the teachers often avoided the issue. It certainly appeared to be an area of difficulty for the teachers. Considering the detailed tests and observations often required for any full diagnostic assessment, it could well be that it is unrealistic to expect the correspondence teachers to deal with these problems. Yet they cannot be avoided!

The most appropriate function for the teachers may be the recognition of a possible problem, the gathering of further relevant information and the subsequent referral of the parent to the appropriate agency, or of the appropriate agency to the parent, if such a course were indicated. For many of these families, their remoteness from services is a serious problem and the only fair solution may be to mobilize the specialist resources to help them in their own home.

Minor problems, once clarified, could be dealt with by the teacher. In fact, of the problems mentioned by parents only one appeared to be of a sufficiently serious nature clearly to require referral. This parent was referred by the teacher to a local Guidance Officer from the Special Education Division of the Department of Education.

Steps need to be taken to ensure that teachers are in a better position to both recognize and advise on problems as well as to elicit the most relevant information. In-service courses together with discussions and close liaison with relevant professional suggort groups, who could advise on the most appropriate courses, could be a reasonable way of achieving this. That is, specialist psychological and remedial services could be mediated through the correspondence teacher except in cases serious enough to justify the provision of a face to face service for the parents and child.

Provision of Information

The provision of information by all parties is an essential feature of any educational process and particularly, in a more formal sense, of a correspondence program. The information provides a basis upon which relationships can be developed, understanding increased and the program individualized. Table 24 provides a summary of the substantive content of comments intended to provide information. Included in the section are two categories, those comments which provided information and those which provided explanations. Comments of explanation were differentiated from those giving information on the grounds that they provided reasons for aspects of the program, for the occurrence of events, or for a particular response. The following examples illustrate the difference.

> Parent 'giving information' to teacher: "D--- thought the nonsense rhyming words were a bit silly. He has never made any attempt to make his own 'nonsense' words."
>
> Teacher 'explaining' to parent: "The reason that D--- thought the nonsense rhymes were a 'bit silly' could perhaps be that the words had no meaning for him. You said he showed interest in the words 'look' and 'book' which he would have understood."

From Table 24 it can be seen that parents gave information to teachers in 312 separate comments, while teachers provided parents with information in only 138 comments. Parents comments centred on the child – his abilities and disabilities, his positive and negative response to the program and his social contacts. Teachers' information to parents, on the other hand, was concerned mainly with the child's class and with program materials.

Comments of these types were made more frequently by teachers to parents than any other type of comment. They accounted for 24.6 per cent of all teacher-parent comments. In case of parent comments to teachers, however, they accounted for 64.3 per cent of all comments.

It is not surprising that so much of the parent comment provided information since teachers depended so heavily on them for it. An examination of the stimuli for parents' comments providing information, however, showed that only 76 (24.4 per cent) resulted from a prior request from the teacher while 222 (71.2 per cent) were unsolicited. Thus not only did teachers provide less information to parents than parents did to them (excluding, of course, the standard program materials distributed to all parents) but most of the information parents provided was not actively sought by the teachers.

A further interesting and revealing feature of Table 24 is the infrequency with which teachers provide explanatory comments to parents. Only 37 such comments were made to the 34 families in a period of 33 weeks. Explanations were made about a limited number of subjects by both parents and teachers. Teachers offered explanations about administrative matters such as the rules of enrolment and the lateness of despatch of program segments, as well as the details of program presentation and program materials. There were also seven comments in which teachers offered explanations which were responsive to a child's negative response to the program. When it is considered that parents gave information about their child's difficulties with or lack of interest in the program in 46 comments and offered their own explanations for this in four comments, the small number of explanations offered by teachers in this regard seems rather inadequate. Although it may well be that the information given by parents was not sufficient to allow teachers to provide explanations of the child's negative response, it would seem reasonable to expect teachers to have given some information about the problem. However this was not the case. Relevant information was given in only two comments.

Teachers' reactions to parental comments about a child's difficulties or negative response to the program need not necessarily have stimulated an explanatory comment, of course. The teacher may have responded with specific proposals for extending or varying the program. However, as the data shown later in Table 26 show, only six comments of this type were offered in such circumstances.

Among the explanations which parents offered, more than 50 per cent gave reasons for the late return of teacher information sheets. Pressure of work, family illness or holidays seemed to be the main causes for delay.

Teachers provided information in both tape and letter form with similar frequency. Parents also used these two forms equally to provide information but, in addition, 64 comments giving information and four giving explanations were included as answers to the open ended questions on the teacher information sheets.

The fact that 64 (20.5 per cent) of all parents' comments giving information were written on the Teacher Information Sheet indicates that it can be a useful means of gathering information and facilitating parents' replies. However, the apparent failure of teachers to provide further information on such matters as the child's negative response to

Table 24: Distribution of Substance of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience Providing Information or Explanations

	T–P				T–C				P–T				C–T			
	Giving Inform.		Explaining		Giving Inform.		Explaining		Giving Inform.		Explaining		Giving Inform.		Explaining	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Background Information																
Child's disabilities	5	3.6	0	0.0	0		0		28	9.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's abilities & interests	2	1.5	0	0.0	2	1.8	0		56	18.0	0	0.0	70	58.8	0	0.0
Family interests	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0	0		36	11.5	0	0.0	24	20.0	0	0.0
Teacher interests	10	7.2	0	0.0	56	50.9	0		2	0.6	0	0.0	2	1.7	0	0.0
Physical surroundings	6	4.3	0	0.0	16	14.6	0		9	2.9	0	0.0	5	4.2	0	0.0
Occupation descriptors	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0		2	0.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's social contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0		11	3.5	0	0.0	4	3.3	0	0.0
Parent's social contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0		1	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	23	16.6	0	0.0	74	67.3	0		145	46.4	0	0.0	105	88.2	0	0.0
Administrative Detail																
Requirements fulfilled	2	1.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	0		2	0.6	1	2.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Requirements unfulfilled	2	1.5	1	2.7	0	0.0	0		5	1.6	3	7.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's class	35	25.3	0	0.0	23	20.9	0		17	5.5	0	0.0	3	2.5	0	0.0
Rules of enrolment	4	2.9	8	21.7	0	0.0	0		2	0.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Lateness of segments	1	0.7	5	13.5	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	23	53.5	0	0.0	1	100.0
Sub Total	42	31.9	14	37.9	23	20.9	0		26	8.3	27	62.8	3	2.5	1	100.0
Program Usage																
Program materials	31	22.5	6	16.2	9	8.2	0		23	7.4	5	11.6	2	1.7	0	0.0
Presentation in home	5	3.6	6	16.2	0	0.0	0		22	7.1	2	4.7	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's positive response	4	2.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0		42	13.5	3	7.0	7	5.9	0	0.0
Child's negative response	2	1.5	7	18.9	0	0.0	0		46	14.7	4	9.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Contact with P.S.C.P. families	3	2.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0		3	1.0	1	2.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
New/alternative activities	8	5.8	1	2.7	0	0.0	0		1	0.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Future program reference	9	6.5	0	0.0	2	1.8	0		0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Contact with parent/teacher/child	9	6.5	2	5.4	2	1.8	0		4	1.3	1	2.3	2	1.7	0	0.0
Program/activity objectives	0	0.0	1	2.7	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	71	51.5	23	62.1	13	11.8	0		141	45.3	16	37.2	11	9.3	0	0.0
Grand Total	138	100.0	37	100.0	110	100.0	0		312	100.0	43	100.0	119	100.0	1	100.0

the program indicates that the questions which evoke such comments need to be more carefully formulated in order to elicit the kind of information that the teachers can use for the child's benefit. Parents' views on teachers' use of information provided in Teacher Information Sheets is discussed by McGaw, Ashby and Grant (1975). Most parents claimed to have seen little evidence of the information being used by teachers.

In the provision of information by teachers to children, shown in Table 24, it is interesting to note that more than 50 per cent of comments were concerned with giving information about the teachers' own interests and activities. Teachers also gave information about other children in the child's class in 23 comments and gave information about the surroundings in which they lived and worked in 16 comments.

The child's abilities and interests were the main subject on which children gave information to teachers, accounting for 58.8 per cent of this type of comment. Children also gave information about family interests and activities in 24 comments. From these results it would seem that both teachers and children are willing to share their everyday experiences with each other and it would seem likely that such sharing would lead to greater knowledge of each others life styles and interests.

However it is intersting to note that the teachers' provision of information to children was never made in the form of an explanation. It may have been that the pre-school teachers, in their correspondence with the children, were not sufficiently familiar with the children's thinking to know what concepts required explanation or they may have doubted the value of such delayed explanations. Whatever the reasons, the absence of explanatory comments in teacher/child interactions suggests that parents are expected to provide this aspect of teaching – apart from the instances of explanation provided in the program materials.

If this were clearly to be the role for parents then it is essential that teachers provide information to parents which would increase their understanding of the child's development of language and thought and give them sufficient examples and suggestions to improve their 'explaining techniques'. Some of these issues have been discussed in the parent education booklet *Contact*. Parents' reactions to this booklet, discussed in some detail in McGaw, Ashby and Grant (1975), ranged from a feeling that it was patronizing to expressions of satisfaction with its helpfulness.

In the contacts of children with teachers there was only one instance of explanation, when a child explained that he had been unable to send a tape earlier because he'd been sick.

The data obtained on the pattern of comments providing information and explanations suggest that, although parents were willing to provide information, teachers were often unable to use it in any directly constructive way. The information may have often been inadequate for the teachers' needs, particularly where the parent was seeking to provide information about problems in the child's development or response to the program. The fact that so much of the information parents provided was unsolicited suggests that teachers could play a much more active role in defining and describing the type of information which would be helpful. If these requests were tailored to the growing information about the child, and not reduced to a common duplicated questionnaire for all parents, the teacher's data base should become much more substantial.

Judgements of Value

Comments of approval or commendation were an important feature of teachers' comments to parents and children accounting for more than 22 per cent of all their comments to both parties. Parents, however, made far fewer comments of approval while children made no value judgements at all. The substance of comments of this type is shown in Table 25.

Table 25: Distribution of Substance of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience Providing Judgements of Value

	T–P				T–C				P–T			
	Approve		Disapprove		Approve		Disapprove		Approve		Disapprove	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Background Information												
Child's disabilities	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's abilities & interests	6	4.8	0		15	13.4	0		1	2.6	0	0.0
Family interests	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Teacher interests	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		1	2.6	0	0.0
Physical Surroundings	1	0.8	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Occupation descriptors	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's social contacts	1	0.8	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Parent's social contacts	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	8	6.4	0		15	13.4	0		2	5.2	0	0.0
Administrative Detail												
Requirements fulfilled	9	7.3	0		2	1.8	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Requirements unfulfilled	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's class	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		2	5.3	0	0.0
Rules of enrolment	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		1	2.6	2	40.0
Lateness of segments	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	9	7.3	0		2	1.8	0		3	7.9	2	40.0
Program Usage												
Program materials	2	1.6	0		1	0.9	0		23	60.6	1	20.0
Presentation in home	25	20.2	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's positive response	73	58.9	0		94	83.9	0		4	10.5	0	0.0
Child's negative response	1	0.8	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Contact with P.S.C.P. families	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
New/alternative activities	1	0.8	0		0	0.0	0		3	7.9	0	0.0
Future program reference	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0	0.0
Contact with parent/teacher/child	5	4.0	0		0	0.0	0		3	7.9	2	40.0
Program/activity objectives	0	0.0	0		0	0.0	0		0.0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	107	86.3	0		95	84.8	0		33	86.9	3	60.0
Grand Total	124	100.0	0		112	100.0			38	100.0	5	100.0

The main focus for teachers' comments of approval to parents was the child's positive response to the program with 58.9 per cent of all approving type comments being made about it. The following extracts provide examples of this type of comment in communications from teachers to parents.

> "Y--- has done all the areas in the work book well. I was impressed with the way she cut out the pictures on the back page . . . and from looking through her other art work that you sent she is still certainly having lots of practice with cutting and gluing activities."
>
> "I am pleased J--- is still enjoying the stories. He seems to be enjoying those ones that are of a fairly long length."
>
> "K--- seems to have developed good number concepts."
>
> "B--- has developed the small muscle skills necessary for him to work with glue and scissors without difficulty. His construction work is balanced and shows definite shape."

Such comments of approval were made on the basis of work sent in by the child and the information provided by the parent. While such approval must serve to reassure parents about their children's progress, there may be instances where such reassurances are not justified. An instance of such a discrepancy between a teacher's assessment of the child's ability and his actual ability was revealed during the field visits of the research staff. In this case the teacher, on the basis of the correct numbers written in the counting section of the work book, had commended the child's number concepts. (See quote 3 above.) Testing of the child in the home situation revealed the child's number concepts to be quite inadequate. The child was unable to count the number of members in a family represented by pictures, for example. In a correspondence program for young children it is difficult for teachers to assess the extent to which parents prompt the child to produce the 'right' answers. Although teachers stressed that it was important for work sent in to be the child's own, it is understandable that some parents would have sought to give teachers the 'best' impression of their children. Thus it was possible that teachers may have commended a child's concept development or achievement on the basis of a distorted picture of the child's performance.

Inevitably, goals must be set and attempts made to achieve them. Although many of the declared program objectives stressed learning processes rather than products teachers, because they were removed from the child and his learning situation, may have tended to base their approval on the 'product' (the work sent in) thus ignoring the process. This in turn, in a subtle way may have reinforced a commonly held parental view that the 'product' is the most important part and may have even encouraged parents to present a distorted but 'rosier' picture of their children's abilities. Another subject to be singled out for the teachers' approval was the parents' presentation of the program within the home with 25 such comments being made. Teachers commended parents for the time given to the program; the flexible way in which it was presented and, in one instance, the father's involvement in the presentation of the program. Teachers also in nine comments expressed approval to parents for meeting requirements.

The stimulus for all but one of the 124 comments of approval was a prior comment made by parents or work sent in by the child. With regard to the form in which these comments appeared, 62 per cent occurred in tapes while the remainder were in letters.

The child's positive response to the program was also the main basis for teachers' comments of approval to children. Of all approving comments to children, 83.9 per cent referred to the child's response. The child's abilities and interests were commended in 15 comments. Such comments as "You were clever to do such colourful paintings and I especially liked the train you made out of the potato prints," were coded as commending or approving the child's positive response to the program. A comment such as "You're very good to tie your own shoe laces up," was regarded as commending the child's abilities.

In every instance such comments were evoked either by a prior comment by the parent of the child or by work that had been sent in. The highest percentage, 76.8, of this type of comment was made on tape, with the remainder being made in letter form.

The fact that comments of approval, which accounted for 22.7 per cent of all teachers comments to children, were made more frequently than any other type of comment, seems to suggest that teachers saw an important part of their role to be encouraging and reinforcing the child's positive response. However, as in the case of teachers' comments of approval to parents, questions can be raised about the appropriateness of some of these comments to children. From the complete absence of any expressions of disapproval it would appear that teachers made the assumption that work sent in represented the child's best effort. This may not necessarily have been the case. One mother pointed out to an interviewer that her child had received praise from a teacher for a painting that had been hurredly and carelessly done. This mother felt that such praise was in fact detrimental to her child's progress for, although she knew her child was capable of better work and tried to encourage it, the child was content with lesser effort and actually told his mother that "Miss X liked his paintings like that".

Although this problem could have been avoided if the mother had told the teacher of the situation when the painting was sent in, so that the teacher could have made more appropriate comments to the child, this example does seem to indicate the dangers inherent in total and apparently indiscriminate approval. Approval is both desirable and necessary in any teaching situation, but it could be more valuable if linked with comments suggesting extentions to the program so that the child is encouraged to develop and extend his ideas and skills while receiving praise for his efforts.

The total absence of disapproval in teachers' comments to both parents and children was interesting. Although some of the requests discussed earlier hinted at disapproval, particularly in relation to parents' failure to meet requirements, there were no direct expressions of disapproval by teachers.

Parents, on the other hand, expressed disapproval on five occasions, as shown in Table 25. Their comments of disapproval were concerned with the rules of enrolment, failure on the part of a teacher to keep in regular personal contact, and aspects of the program's presentation. Although such disapproving comments accounted for only one per cent of all comments made by parents to teachers, their content can provide a useful basis for review of procedures and practices. The fact that some parents were sufficiently involved and motivated to offer criticism was encouraging.

Parents made only 38 approving comments to teachers. Of these, 23 expressed approval of the program materials, in particular the library books which had been forwarded, the personalized tapes, and the equipment kit materials. Parents in three comments commended teachers for suggesting new or alternative activities and, in a further three comments, praised teachers for their contact and support. Another feature of comments of approval by parents was four separate expressions of approval of their own child's positive response to the program, an indirect expression of approval of the program.

The fact that parents offered only 38 comments of approval to teachers compared with the teachers' 124 such comments to them, indicates that the teachers were much more supportive of the parents than the parents were of the teachers. Although it was important for teachers to ensure that their approval was appropriate and that it encouraged further effort, it would also seem important that more opportunities be given to parents to express judgements of value. Parents' views would then be more likely to influence the program's overall development. Such parental involvement has certainly been stated as a basic objective in the Pre-School Correspondence Program.

Extensions to Program

The Pre-School Correspondence Program prepared by the development team and despatched to all children in the program, was a common program for all children. The only way in which the teaching team could provide any individualization of the program was by suggesting or providing new or alternative ideas for activities or program presentation. The basis for such suggestions would have had to be their knowledge of the child's level of development and interests and the capacities of the parent. To some extent options were built into the program itself simply because it was not a tightly prescribed package. Some parents treated it as the basis for a special 'school' period each day. Others simply used it as a stimulus for extending their more routine interactions with their children.

The extent to which the teachers in the teaching team offered specific suggestions to parents for extensions to the program is shown in Table 26. There were 51 such comments made to parents, that is 51 suggestions for unique variations to the program offered over a period of 33 weeks to 34 families. At this rate, a family could, on average, have expected one suggestion every 22 weeks, which indicates a very low level of professional contribution from the teachers.

Of the 51 suggestions the teachers did make, 32 involved suggestions of new ideas or alternative activities. An example is given below.

> her to parent: "I was interested in J---'s comment about how she had been mixing her paints. I take it that she has become interested in painting again. If you find that she loses interest later on in the program perhaps you could vary the presentation. She might enjoy painting on paper spread on the floor, or doing sponge or shadow painting."

In another example, following a parent's comment that her child was rather bored by the 'Feely Box' activity the teacher suggested that the mother "provide the activity again selecting a group of objects among which it will be much harder for her to guess what they are without looking."

Other suggestions were made with regard to the presentation of the program in the home and to program materials. The child's disabilities, his negative response to the program and ways of increasing parents' contacts with teacher were each the subject for suggestions in three specific comments.

The data in Table 26 also shows that teachers provided parents with materials for new activities and supplementary program materials on 24 occasions. The five instances of materials being provided by teachers to parents which were coded as 'unfulfilled requirements' were occasions on which materials which had been reported as mistakenly omitted or lost in the post were separately despatched.

Table 26: Distribution of Substance of Comments from Each Source to Each Audience Suggesting Extensions to the Program

	T–P				T–C				P–T				C–T			
	Suggesting		Providing		Suggesting		Providing		Suggesting		Providing		Suggesting		Providing	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Background Information																
Child's disabilities	3	5.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	11.1	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's abilities & interests	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	18.2	2	2.7	0	0.0	7	77.8	0	0.0	0	0.0
Family interests	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Teachr interests	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	8	10.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Physical surroundings	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Occupation descriptors	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's social contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Parent's social contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	3	5.9	0	0.0	4	18.2	10	13.4	0	0.0	8	88.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
Administrative Detail																
Requirements fulfilled	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Requirements unfulfilled	0	0.0	5	17.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's class	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Rules of enrolment	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Lateness of segments	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	0	0.0	5	17.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Program Usage																
Program materials	4	7.8	4	13.8	2	9.1	4	5.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Presentation in home	5	9.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Child's positive response	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	50	98.0
Child's negative response	3	5.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Contact with P.S.C.P. families	1	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
New/alternative activities	32	62.7	20	69.0	16	72.7	61	81.3	0	0.0	1	11.1	0	0.0	1	2.0
Future program reference	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Contact with parent/teacher/child	3	5.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Program/activity objectives	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Sub Total	48	94.1	24	82.8	18	81.8	65	86.6	1	100.0	1	11.1	0	0.0	51	100.0
Grand Total	51	100.0	29	100.0	22	100.0	75	100.0	1	100.0	9	100.0	0	0.0	51	100.0

Of the teachers' suggestions for program variations, 88.2 per cent were stimulated by a prior comment with only one being made in response to a specific prior request. Five of these suggestions were offered spontaneously. Such comments were made with similar frequency in both letters (24) and tapes (27). In the actual provision of supplementary materials, however, the stimulus was a prior comment in 13 instances but, in a further 13, the provision was unsolicited. In three cases, the provision was a response to an explicit request.

The number of extensions to the program which teachers made in their interactions with children was relatively small. There were only 22 instances of suggestions for activities and 75 occasions on which teachers actually provided materials for the activities. (See Table 26.) The actual provision of new activities, such as taped stories and songs or work sheets, occurred on 61 occasions. These were additional to those which were forwarded routinely in the segment packages. Such tapes were individualized to the extent that they consisted of stories which related to the children's known interests or included favourite songs which had been requested.

Although these data indicate that individualized extensions were possible within the Pre-School Correspondence Program, the small number shows that it was not a frequent occurrence. Each child received, on average, fewer than two such provisions in the 33 week period.

The eight provisions made in relation to teachers' interests reflected teachers efforts to share their own experiences with children in a concrete way. For example, one teacher, after visiting the beach, forwarded some shells she had collected to a child. Teachers also provided children with additional program materials, such as milk bottle tops for pasting or threading (on four occasions) and pictures which related to the child's particular interests (on two occasions).

In addition to these provisions each teacher sent a photograph of herself to each child for whom she was responsible and a birthday card for the child at the appropriate time. However, because these could be regarded as routine provisions they were not coded for the purposes of analysis here.

In view of the importance of such extensions in individualizing the program, these findings suggest that the program was not being individualized to any great extent. Parents views of the extent to which the program was individualized support this observation (McGaw, Ashby and Grant, 1975).

Although other types of comments, such as those giving information or approval, may have contributed to the individualization of the program, without any practical suggestions or the actual provision of alternative activities and materials, teachers would have had to rely entirely on the parents to 'individualize' the common program. In the light of the many other demands made on parents and in view of the fact that the provision of a more individualized program by teachers appeared possible, it would seem important for teachers to assume more direct responsibility for it.

It should be remembered, however, that such provision is dependent on the responses of parents and children. With little or no feedback such individualization would not be possible. From the frequency of contact presented in Table 4, which showed that parents averaged 5.8 contacts with teachers and children 3.6, it seems that parents and children were willing to assist teachers in this way.

There was only one instance of a parent offering a suggestion to a teacher. (See Table 26.) The suggestion was that the teacher visit the family if she were in the district. The instances recorded in Table 26 of parents providing teachers with supplementary materials involved only the provision of photographs of the child or family. This was certainly an underestimate of the frequency with which parents made such provision because the only cases coded were those where the photograph was included in the file or referred to in communications.

The one instance of parent provision relating to the child's disabilities was a tape recording of a child's speech taken by the parent at the teacher's request to determine the extent of any speech problem. The remaining instance of provision by a parent took the form of a brief article which she had found to be helpful with her child and which she offered for inclusion in the parent booklet *Contact*.

As shown in Table 26 children made no suggestions to teachers but on 50 occasions provided teachers with evidence of their own positive response to the program. These included paintings, pastings, threaded necklaces, and recording of rhymes and songs on tape. This figure does not refer to the actual number of articles sent in but to the number of occasions on which such evidence was supplied. Some children provided four or five examples of their art work on the one occasion. In some instances parents commented that children were so prolific and eager to show teachers their work, that they had to limit the number of articles sent in. On the other hand a few mothers commented on their children's unwillingness to part with any samples of their work.

The overall amount of provision of work by children to teachers, however, seemed sufficient to enable teachers to build up some picture of the child's stage of development with regard to certain skills and abilities. The main response of teachers to these provisions was a comment of approval and commendation with relatively few comments offering suggestions for new and different activities. If the program is to be seriously individualized, and if the professional staff on the teaching team are to effectively use their expertise, there need to be a careful analysis of the type of evidence needed to indicate a child's development and a serious attempt to gather such evidence.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The development of a State-wide system of pre-school education in Queensland, to be provided by the State government, was not begun until 1972. The establishment of a Pre-School Correspondence Program in 1974 constitutes perhaps one of the most novel features of that development. In 1974, the correspondence program was offered to children who would, because of their remoteness, have begun their primary school by correspondence in 1975. In 1975 and 1976, in two stages, the criteria for enrolment have been relaxed to include also children who would attend small, one or two teacher, primary schools after their year with the Pre-School Correspondence Program.

The series of evaluation studies of the operation of the correspondence program have a clearly formative purpose. The general approach of the correspondence program and, to some extent, the detail of its content are examined from a theoretical standpoint in the first report (Ashby, McGaw and Perry, 1975); the demographic characteristics of children who have enrolled are described in the second (Ashby, McGaw and Perry, 1975); the interactions between the teachers and a sample of the families are analysed in this, the third report; and the perceptions and judgements of the parents are analysed in the fourth (McGaw, Ashby and Grant, 1975).

The first report, therefore, provides an analysis of the work of the development team responsible for the design of the program and the support materials. The present report provides an analysis of the inputs of the teaching team. The fourth, through its dependence on parents' judgements, provides grounds for assessment of both the program materials and their use and the role of the teaching team. Subsequent reports will present the perceptions and judgements of the teachers in both the development and the teaching teams and a more detailed observational analysis of parents' use of the program in their homes.

The analyses in the present report have shown a great deal of variability among both parents and teachers in the pattern of their correspondence. While some wrote frequently and expansively, others wrote only occasionally and briefly. The average rate of communication from a teacher to a parent was only once every nine weeks. Some parents, of course, received communications much more frequently but, as an average, this was surprisingly low. It is clear that if the teaching team is to have any meaningful impact on the way parents use the program they will need to establish more regular patterns of contact. Each teacher in 1975 was responsible for 32 families so an average of one communication every nine weeks for the families meant that the teachers were, on average, generating 3.5 communications in a week. From these analyses it is not clear what all the impediments to more substantial communication were. The teachers' views of the issue will be reported in a subsequent report. One factor, which has been cited in this report as a cause for delay, was the administrative policy, within the correspondence unit, of senior staff checking and approving all correspondence before despatch. A second factor was that the parents, to a large extent, became the determiners of the rate of communication. Teachers wrote most to those who responded most.

There is clearly a need for the rate of correspondence to be increased and the length of delay before reply by the teachers to be reduced. If necessary, the numbers of families for which each teacher is responsible should be reduced to achieve this.

The data presented in the report suggest that communication was richest, in terms of the number of issues raised, when it occurred face to face, and most restricted when it occurred in letter form. The use of cassette tapes provided an alternative superior to the letter, one which should be further exploited. Moves to ensure that every family has a recorder/player in future years appear to be well based.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the analyses of the interactions reported in this report is the evidence that for the most crucial issues teachers appeared not to have the necessary information. Though parents provided a good deal of information to the teachers, much of it was unsolicited and much of it not useful to the teachers except in a very general way. The teachers very seldom provided explanations about the program or extensions to it and, when parents made reference to difficulties they were experiencing either with their child's behaviour and development or with the program, the teachers often failed to help or even to answer.

There is no suggestion that the teachers wilfully avoided a responsibility. They appeared to lack the information with which to answer. Their lack of responsiveness was greatest when the parents' problems were greatest. That is, in those situations where the teachers most needed fairly precise information to be able to help, they actually had least information. The teachers need to play a more constructive role in gathering the information they need to provide the relevant advice and service when required. This can probably not be achieved by further extensions to the Background Information Sheets and the regular Teacher Information Sheets but rather through judicious unique questionning in the personal correspondence between teacher and parent. Parents already perceive some of the general information being gathered as serving no purpose.

Where the parents are concerned about devleopmental or behavioural problems, the teachers need ready access to advisory services in the first place to determine what more precise information the parents should be asked for and, in the second, to assist in the formulation of suggestions to the parents. Given the proportion of parents' comments about difficulties in this area which went unanswered, the provision of such specialist support services for the teachers should be a matter of high priority.

In other areas of early childhood education, where the teacher is in regular personal contact with the child, it may be appropriate for the teacher to adopt the role of a responder to the expressed interests of the child, but in a correspondence situation the teacher's role needs to be more active. The teacher must ensure that she collects the information she needs on which to establish appropriate responses to the child. The teacher must initially be active to establish a base of information in terms of which to respond to the child. It is in actively gathering and shaping information that the teachers most need to change their role in order to act as a support and resource for parents and provide a more individualized program for children.

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